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The audience is confronted by a series of close-up shots of people staring directly into the camera, as if caught unaware by a sudden intrusion. The happy faces subtlely change, indicating that what this person has just seen challenges them, and in certain cases, offends them. With all of this scored to the

pulsing and unnerving metallic beat of *If I Had A Heart* by Fever Ray, the opening sequence of *Laurence Anyways* (Dolan, 2012) creates a sense of being subjected to the gaze of others, being undeservedly scrutinised and judged by hungry eyes. No identification is granted. Every set of eyes only offers more mistrust and inquiry, forcing the recipient of the gaze to search for others in hopes of finding validation. The audience has in fact experienced this entire sequence through the eyes of what appears to be a woman, a definitive statement of sex denied to the audience by no

shot of this person’s face. The broad-shouldered, tall figure disappears into a cloud of fog, in high heels, a blazer and a skirt. By watching the film, we come to realise this figure was in fact Laurence, the male protagonist of the film, dressed as a woman. The audience has therefore experienced the same reactions that Laurence encounters as a transgender male, allowing the identification denied in the beginning to happen now. This sequence encapsulates the ideas of the gaze in cinema as a powerful tool for subjugation and objectification, yet by aligning the

audience with a transgender character through which notions of the male gaze are complicated, *Laurence Anyways* allows space for new interpretations on an oppressive and dominating topic.

In her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey draws on the influential writings of Freud and Lacan to show how psychoanalytical approaches to mainstream cinema reveal its inherent objectification and demeaning of women, revealing their perceived status as passive subordinates to men. Patriarchal society’s inherent need to dampen the fear of woman as castrated

man has led to an unconscious structuring of film form in order to both demystify and fetishise women, therefore giving men a pleasurable viewing experience. Through the creation of a seamless diegesis by way of adherence to realist filmmaking and aesthetic principles these ideas are further reinforced, creating a seemingly inescapable pattern of repression. Mulvey points the way forward by championing alternative cinema as she believes it provides “a space for the birth of a cinema which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the

mainstream film” (Mulvey, 2000: 36). In its challenging of the conventions of the male gaze, as well as its narrative based on transgenderism, *Laurence Anyways* marks a way forward in terms of Mulvey’s argument. By overtly foregrounding a revisionist take on the gaze, its continual subversion throughout the film becomes discernibly clear. Laurence himself is obviously a main protagonist, but the character of his girlfriend, Fred, shares equal weight within the film as she confronts her partner’s wish to change sex. Laurence’s mother also plays a vital role in subverting notions of the conventional loving

mother figure. Even though Laurence’s conversion is the catalyst for the action of the film, the autonomy of the characters involved is never disputed.

In order to demonstrate how the male unconscious dominates film form, Mulvey deconstructs the gaze into three constituent parts; the look of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, how characters within the diegesis look at one another, and finally, the look of the audience. The look of the camera and the audience are subordinated to the third aspect in conventional narrative film, “the conscious aim being to eliminate

intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience” (Mulvey: 47). By examining *Laurence Anyways* through these separate elements, its attempt to challenge, subvert and reconstitute conventions of mainstream cinema becomes evident at a fundamental level. Although a captivating film, it refuses to create a seamless diegesis within which the audience is absorbed. The film’s artifice is foregrounded from the opening sequence, but continues throughout the film, specifically in the moments verisimilitude is shattered by the introduction of the

80s/90s soundtrack, a mise-en-scene saturated in stylistic grandeur and rapid editing. By openly exposing its construction, the film unashamedly declares its thematic and subversive intentions from the outset.

The most notable of these scenes is that in which Fred enters the ballroom, accompanied by “Fade To Grey” by Visage. The camera pans through a room of black silhouettes, emphasizing their sameness. Once the music kicks in however the tone completely changes. We are subjected to a rapid litany of uniquely costumed faces, all aimed towards the door

to announce Fred’s arrival as she emerges from a blanket of fog, arms outstretched and cape billowing behind her. The films asks for a suspension of disbelief as she twirls into the room as if on a rotating pedestal, and all those around stare up at her in awe as if a flame haired, sequined angel had descended into their midst. She does not return their look; she stares directly up. In returning to reality she walks through the room, the camera emphasizing the slit in the back of her dress and those staring at her. She returns the gaze with a playful wink.https://www.youtube.com/em

bed/mDZVCxGQXkA?version=3&rel=1&showsearch=0&showinfo=1&iv_load_policy=1&fs=1&hl=en&autohide=2&wmode=transparent

Easily seen as just absurdist fantasy, this scene is actually much more as it offers an interesting comment on the topic of the cinematic gaze. Initially almost beaten down by image after image of eyes fixed on her, Fred enters defiantly. The emphasis on the slit in her dress does indeed sexualise her, but not in the typical way which indicates subordination. We are the one’s following her, we are in her command. The femininity

ascribed to her is not demeaning or negative; it is powerful and marks her as the instigator of action. She is the subject. Her stare upwards is also significant when read in relation to images of the male pin-up, discussed by Richard Dyer. In his essay “Don’t Look Now: The Male Pin-Up,” he notes that, “in the case of not looking, where the female model typically averts her eyes, expressing modesty, patience and a lack of interest in anything else, the male model looks either off or up.” (1992: 267). The man’s stare upwards indicates a disinterest in his viewer and no connection to them but the

woman’s averted eyes acknowledge the gaze as “they are averted from the viewer” (267). Rather than staying in line with the feminine aspect of looking away, Fred is aligned with the masculine position; by averting her eyes she is dominating the room rather than being an object within it. This occupation of the masculine role however does not reduce her empowered femininity. Her role as dominator is a role of power, which men have historically claimed for themselves, appropriating it as a masculine position rather than it being inherently masculine itself. In this scene, Fred reclaims that

position of power to show women may also occupy it and imbue the position of dominator with a feminine element.

A similarly progressive use of the gaze is highlighted through Laurence’s strange and somewhat frosty relationship with both his mother and father. The way in which both parents are shot reveals something very interesting about them. Both are associated with an intense gaze. The first time we are introduced to Laurence’s father he is watching TV, the screen we are watching the film through acting as the screen through which Laurence’s father

watches TV. The audience stares at him, and he stares right back at us. Throughout the scene as Laurence attempts to talk to him, his gaze does not falter, the shot does not change. He remains staring at us and neglecting his son, the male gaze here still penetrating, but somehow also portrayed as lazy, flaccid and neglectful. It holds no power. However, his mother’s gaze is just the opposite of this. When he confronts her and tells her his wish to be a woman, Laurence’s mother averts her eyes from him, choosing to remain looking at the ground. He becomes frustrated and asks her to look at him, and her lies

the major difference. She looks directly at him, the intensity and scrutiny of her gaze almost palpable among the audience. However, this powerful looking is then associated with love and comfort as his mother goes on to entail how she still loves him and she always knew her son would eventually become her daughter. Even though she has examined him through a mechanism of cinema often associated with containment and oppression, Laurence's mother's gaze serves as a validation of his choice and as a comfort to him also. The diminishing power of the male gaze

is highlighted when put in contrast with the powerful yet nurturing female gaze of Laurence’s mother.

According to E. Ann Kaplan, this kind of examination of the role of motherhood is important in furthering discussion on the topic of women in cinema in order to grant them a filmic vocabulary not determined by governing patriarchal bodies. She states that:

The domination of women by the male gaze is part of men’s strategy to contain the threat that the mother embodies, and to control the positive and negative impulses that memory traces of being

mothered have left in the male unconscious” (Kaplan, 2000: 135)

Rather than suppressing the universal fact that everyone has a mother, *Laurence Anyways* embraces the fact and aims to show the positive elements of motherhood and the positive effects it can have on the child. Laurence’s mother, while being a wholly believable character in herself, can also be read as an allegory for the subversion of the male gaze. This reading comes from her relationship with her husband and builds on notions of the male/female gaze mentioned above in relation to the two

characters. Laurence’s mother, although a powerful and wilful woman, is seen to be subordinate to her husband. She waits on him hand and foot due to some unnamed illness and she sacrifices her own autonomy and relationship with her son in order to facilitate him. The father serves as an analogy for the male gaze as throughout the film, he is only ever depicted as staring at the TV screen. Laurence’s mother says he will never accept his son as a woman, so therefore the male gaze is again associated with containment. However, as his mother begins to talk more with

her son and realise the dire situation that he is in, she becomes empowered, culminating in her destroying the TV at which her husband has stared for the entirety of the film. In essence, she has destroyed what was being looked at, the thing that was subordinate to her husband’s gaze, disrupting the notion of the male gaze. Her growing maternal power made it possible for her to free herself, showing motherhood to be an empowering and validating experience. *Laurence Anyways* engages with the topic of motherhood unlike many other contemporary films have and in

terms of Kaplan’s argument, it channels a way forward for its discussion in cinema.

In both the way the film is shot and the way the characters within the diegesis interact, subversive forms in terms of the cinematic gaze have been found. The film continues this trend in terms of audience reception, the gaze being complicated by the main figure of Laurence. Intrinsic to the success or failure of a narrative is the audience identification (or the sometimes lack there of) with the characters in the filmic world. The audience experience the world through their eyes and therefore

share the view and views of the characters. However, with the character of Laurence, it is difficult to associate one particular segment of the audience with him; should men identify with him as he is male and therefore recognise themselves in him, should women audiences identify with him as the film is essentially a tale about becoming a woman, or should the audience be limited to transgender people who have experienced the same events as Laurence? The short answer is in fact, all three groups can identify with him. In his essay “Masculinity as Spectacle,”

Steve Neale explains how this is possible:

..identification is never simply a matter of men identifying with male figures on the screen and women identifying with female figures. Cinema draws on and involves many desires, many forms of desire. And desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions and roles” (Neale 278).

By occupying the role of male and female at the same time, Laurence allows for both female and male viewers to identify with him. This subverts the male gaze even

further as the characters displayed on screen are not portrayed in a way in which to sexualise or demean them. By allowing us to identify with Laurence, we experience the world through his dual gendered view, allowing us to look past issues of gender and sexuality to see the whole of the person.

From the very opening scene, *Laurence Anyways* sets about changing perceptions associated with the male gaze in cinema, and starts to rework the formula so as to adapt it for a contemporary cinema free from restrictions based on the unconscious patriarchal

structures surrounding film making. By centring the debate on Mulvey's article which was seminal in uncovering the patriarchal influence in cinema, *Laurence Anyways* truly asserts itself as a member of a new form of cinema that allows for free expression on topics which have not been yet discussed in film. It makes the viewer aware of the unconscious patterns governing film making only to subvert them within the film in a new and highly original way. When considered in the context of Kaplan's article, *Laurence Anyways* marks the way forward for a cinema free of structural

restrictions and truly highlights film as a medium for social debate and change.